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HEADLINE: News Media's 'Buckraking';
Moonlighting Proves Lucrative, Controversial

BYLINE: Eleanor Randolph, Washington Post Staff Writer

BODY:

Bruce Harmon has run up against many closed doors as chief Washington reporter for the Knight-Ridder Financial News service, but few have been more frustrating than the doors closed in front of him on Wednesday morning at The Madison Hotel.

This time, it wasn't the government or a big corporation keeping out the working press. It was two big-time newspaper columnists -- Rowland Evans and Robert Novak -- excluding their less-famous working brethren, including Harmon.

Evans and Novak had lured 125 consultants and financialanalysts (at $ 350 a head) to hear public officials speak "off the record" at one of their regular "forums." The chief attraction this time was Treasury Secretary James A. Baker III, who spoke free as a favor to the columnists. (An aide to Baker told The Washington Post that Evans and Novak used to rough up Baker in their column and that the secretary refused in those days to speak to their forum; but since they began treating him more sympathetically, he has been willing to appear.)

Baker's comments, reported almost instantly by members of the audience to their offices in New York, had "whipsawed" the dollar, as Harmon would write later, contributing to a wave of Wall Street rumors.

"Evans and Novak -- these guys are in some business other than journalism," Harmon fumed as he buttonholed men in dark executive suits for their versions of the Baker speech.

But it is business. Wednesday's event earned the columnists about $ 14,000 each, the equivalent of what they make from two or three speeches.

The New Republic magazine coined the term "buckraking" (muckraking for big bucks), and it has caught on; many journalists express concern about how they peddle their talents and how much they get paid for it.

The television appearances, the speeches, the package deals have become part of the dreams of young journalists who know that Patrick J. Buchanan, for example, took in $ 400,000 in 1984 before he became White House communications director for a while.

A smart columnist, who also manages to do well on television, can easily earn more than $ 150,000 per year. There have been estimates that a few -- Evans and Novak, George Will and John McLaughlin -- can gross close to $ 1 million in a good year.

Has journalism -- once a sure-fire way to remain humbly middle-class -- become a means to get rich? Do reporters, who a generation ago considered $ 15,000 a year a princely wage and used to be among those citizens who worry about paying the rent -- now spend more time worrying about how to pick the best accountants? Can the old code of journalism -- comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable -- survive when reporters can afford to join country clubs?

The beneficiaries demur. Mel Elfin, former Washington bureau chief of Newsweek and now with U.S. News & World Report, said: "The higher pay not only attracts better people, it also attracts fewer drunks."

Or as columnist Jack W. Germond put it: "Who says journalists have to take a vow of poverty?"

Most reporters, of course, still make far less than the big names.

"There is a huge dichotomy in journalists' salaries. Washington, New York, Boston, Chicago look impressive because The [Newspaper] Guild has negotiated some handsome packages," media analyst John Morton said. "Many of those are making $ 40,000, $ 50,000; some a good deal more. They're not up there with lawyers and doctors, but it's probably in there with dentists and high-class plumbers." Some of the highest-paid reporters who write news stories (not columnists who write opinion pieces) in Washington and New York earn $ 80,000 to $ 90,000 annually.

Syndicated columnists often combine the column, television appearances and speaking tours in a lucrative package. "It is a pieced-together existence. And, frankly, the writing part of it is the least lucrative," said former White House press secretary Jody Powell, who tried journalism for six years before becoming a public relations executive this year. "It's the visibility that is important. And, once again, it is the big eye [television] that holds it all together."

Speeches are the biggest, easiest money for reporters, who are good storytellers by tradition. Fees for speeches, according to those who book media people such as agents and convention managers, range from $ 500 for hard-news police reporter Edna Buchanan at The Miami Herald to $ 30,000 for radio personality Paul Harvey.

Harvey pays his expenses out of his fee, including the use of his own airplane, and thus nets about $ 25,000 per performance. An assistant to Harvey, who confirmed his fee, said he gives about a speech a week, which would earn him $ 1.3 million a year from speaking alone.

Television stars, in line with their salaries, command the largest fees and give the fewest number of speeches.

"The $ 12,000 to $ 15,000 range is for anybody that's visible -- Ted Koppel, Dan Rather, Charles Kuralt, George Will," said Alan Walker, a leading agent for speakers. "If you have to start explaining who these people are, then the ability to ask these big fees goes down immediately."

Television can also make working reporters visible. For example, Helen Thomas, who as United Press International's White House correspondent asks the first question at every presidential news conference, commands a speaking fee of $ 3,000, according to Walker -- inexpensive compared to many broadcasters.

"Maybe that's why so many people ask for her," Walker said.

Other favorites, according to agents and organizers of events that pay the fees, are Hugh Sidey, Mark Shields, John McLaughlin, Germond and "any television anchor or correspondent who has the time to do it," as California agent Ruth Alben said.

"There is a big market for news media people now," Alben adds. "They are just as celebrated as movie stars, in some cases even more so."

Germond, who writes a syndicated column with Jules Witcover, said their column appears four times a week in about 140 papers. At an average syndication fee of about $ 13 per paper per week, that's almost $ 95,000 split between the two. Appearances on McLaughlin's show, "The McLaughlin Group" earn Germond about $ 28,000 a year; speeches bring in a maximum of $ 75,000 ($ 2,000 for Washington appearances, $ 5,000 for out of town, more if it comes through an agent who normally takes a 25 percent to 33 percent fee).

If the "Today" show at NBC-TV decides to ask Germond back as a regular for the political season, that will be an extra $ 5,000. Germond-Witcover also write a weekly column for the National Journal.

There is no book contract for this campaign year, and although a book "isn't the way you make money . . . it's important and something we want to do anyway," Germond said.

The whole package can earn Germond about $ 150,000 a year, even though he only admits to an occasionally veering over the line into the six-figure bracket.

For Germond, like other political columnists, the decision to make a speech often depends on where it needs to be given.

"One of the things that goes into my thinking about it is 'Do they pay for my expenses and gargantuan appetites?' " he said, chuckling. Then he added seriously, "And also, does it take me somewhere where I can do another story?"

Germond's less outgoing partner, Witcover, said he does about four or five speeches a year "mostly to colleges and universities where you get feedback." He added that at The (Baltimore) Sun, where the two have office space and some paid expenses, the speech requests come in at about a rate of 20 to one for Germond.

"I don't think it's just because of television," said Witcover of his short, portly partner. "It's because he's tall, dark and handsome."

"I've written several books about politics, but it doesn't make any difference," Witcover added.

Hugh Sidey, whose fees reportedly range from $ 5,000 to $ 7,500 (he did not want to talk about them), said that he gives 30 to 50 speeches a year for pay "and a lot of other free ones" to Central Intelligence Agency and State Department seminars or journalism classes. That means that beyond his salary Sidey can earn $ 150,000 to $ 375,000 on speeches -- a third of which goes to his agent.

Sidey, who writes a weekly column for Time and who appears on "The Agronsky & Co." television show, said that each speech is different "although there are elements that are the same."

"There is my 'leadership' speech that people ask for sometimes where I review the presidents I have known, but even there I don't have a text," said Sidey, who turns 60 in September.

Sidey, who bridles at the term conservative and who labels himself a Kennedy Democrat, is among the favorite speakers for Bernard Swain, partner of the Washington Speakers Bureau Inc., because of the anecdotes "and because people just like him."

"It does tilt towards business groups wanting conservatives now," Swain said. "I'm not sure if the government changes that this will change with it."

"The speeches, that's where you're really printing money," said one journalist who moved into the limelight recently. "Anybody who's any good at this can do it without even looking at notes. It's a snap."

The golden microphone, however, has begun to draw detractors. If a columnist speaks for too many trade associations, will he begin to tailor his remarks and his thinking and then his columns? Does it take too much time away from the basic practice of journalism?

"I wouldn't ever want to stand in the way of a print journalist making more money," said Bryce Nelson, former New York Times and Los Angeles Times reporter who is now director of the journalism school at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles. "But what they should be paid for is their production as journalists. A speech a week, you can't do that and maintain the quality of your reporting," Nelson said.

Said Churchill Roberts, chairman of the Department of Communications Arts at the University of West Florida in Pensacola: "These fees are just astronomical. I think it is a little bit of crass commercialism that worries some of us when journalists are making more off speaking than they are off their craft.

"I just don't think it creates a very good image for journalism," said Roberts, who works through booking agents for speeches at his university and at a local speaking club. "It bothers me -- the first-class airplane tickets, the private planes -- it is all the trappings of royalty."

Journalists interviewed for this article protested down to a person that they avoid speaking to political or governmental groups for pay and that they refuse to speak to any group when a speech might create the appearance of a conflict and would embarrass their news organization.

"I have given speeches to trade organizations -- I gave a speech to the National Pork Association a couple of years ago where the woman's organization was called the 'Porkettes' -- and is it a problem? No, it isn't a problem," said ABC White House correspondent Sam Donaldson, whose fee is about $ 10,000 for the six to 10 speeches he has time for each year.

David Broder, political columnist for The Post and whose standard speaking fee is $ 3,500 to $ 4,000 but goes down for universities, said that he decided

not to have a speaking agent because he wanted to have more control over his appearances.

"It's a tricky area," Broder said. "I also really don't want to be in a position where the speeches become a large part of the economic mix for me so that I find myself sayng 'Hey, I've got to make five or six more speeches this year to earn what I need.' "

The rules for reporters working in the newsrooms of The Post, The New York Times and The Wall Street Journal, among others, are often tougher about outside income.

"I tell my staff that they can't speak to any political group or to anybody who directly lobbies the Congress," said Journal Washington bureau chief Albert Hunt. "After that, the final test is 'How would it look in the Washington Journalism Review?' "

Said Post Managing Editor Leonard Downie Jr.: "Generally speaking, any outside work -- whether television appearances, free-lance work, speeches, what have you -- has to be cleared through the supervisor for potential conflicts of interest of all kinds."

Speaking for some groups does become somewhat prickly, however. In the early 1970s, Post columnists Broder and Haynes Johnson were listed as consultants for the Wall Street financial firm that is now PaineWebber after they had become regular speakers at a forum run by the firm's president.

During one presentation by Broder in Miami, a Miami Herald reporter who covered the event gave a copy of the brochure to the paper's editor. The editor wrote Broder, with a copy to Post management, asking whether this was a proper thing for a political reporter to do.

Broder and Johnson then wrote the securities firm to explain that as occasional speakers, they were not consultants. They would give their views of the Washington political scene but they could not advise PaineWebber or its clients about what Congress does that might affect them.

Books, while a lot tougher work than speeches, can earn bigger money for those who don't do as well on television. At The Post, sportswriter John Feinstein and Assistant Managing Editor Bob Woodward have written books that have made them millionaires.

Among journalistic entrepreneurs, Evans and Novak are a breed apart, with feet in every medium and a schedule that might exhaust a college-age campaign volunteer.

They write a column four times a week for 130 newspapers, including The Post. They are roving editors for Readers' Digest and write four articles a year for that magazine. They do a weekly interview show for Cable News Network and contribute "gossipy" items to CNN on Fridays and Mondays. Novak is a regular on "The McLaughlin Group" and appears frequently on CNN's "Crossfire."

They put out two newsletters -- the Evans-Novak Political Report with 1,500 subscribers ($ 125 each for one year or $ 200 for two years) and the Evans-Novak Tax Report, with about 375 subscribers ($ 200 or one year or $ 350 for two

years).

And twice a year they stage the Evans-Novak Political Forum for 75 to 125 subscribers to the political report newsletter. Past forums have drawn speakers from Vice President Bush to Sen Edward M. Kennedy (D-Mass.).

This time the forum participants were Baker, presidential hopefuls Rep. Richard A. Gephardt (D-Mo.) and Senate Minority Leader Robert J. Dole (R-Kan.), Federal Reserve Vice Chairman Manuel H. Johnson, Defense Secretary Caspar W. Weinberger and White House assistant Kenneth Cribb.

The session had to be off the record -- and closed to a Washington Post reporter -- because the speakers would not agree to come otherwise, Evans said. But the speakers disagreed. Said Gephardt as he left: "I never say anything anywhere that's off the record."

Weinberger's spokesman, Robert B. Sims, said: "Weinberger would say the same thing to a group off the record as on the record. Those are their rules, not our rules."

Germond said in an interview that Evans' and Novak's use of prominent officials to turn a profit was "blackjacking their sources," but the columnists disagreed. Evans said that television interview shows like CBS News' "Face the Nation" also use public figures to make money. Novak said columnist William F. Buckley has public figures as guests on his television program.

Evans insisted politicians agree to appear at the forum because "there's a resonance in the audience that they're interested in, this is an interesting group. The forum is a serious enough exercise that, except for presidents, they come."

When told that reporters had been locked out while Baker's comments were conveyed to Wall Street by businessmen in their audience, they said that this was a "very unusual case" with a volatile market that could not have been predicted when they asked Baker to appear almost six months ago.

Accustomed to criticism by journalists for this forum, Evans said, "I suppose a lot of journalists wouldn't do what we're doing, but we're not gouging at $ 350. A lot of those people who come say we could charge $ 1,000 each, but we don't."

Asked why one member of the Evans-Novak fulltime staff of four tried to persuade the house detective to throw a Washington Post reporter out of the Madison Hotel during their forum Wednesday, Evans apologized and said it was a "mistake."

"Do you know which member of the staff?" asked Novak, smiling wickedly. "Maybe we could arrange for a bonus."

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